

OVER THE COFFEE

Entry No. 29 in Our Prize Story Competition

BY SARAH GUERNSEY BRADLEY

I HAD not seen Jack Carroll in two years, and when his cheerful voice came over the telephone, telling me that he was once more back in the land of his fathers and asking me to help him celebrate by having dinner with him at an eating place where he and I had been wont to forgather in the long ago, I almost jumped through the transmitter in my joy.

The truth was, I was tired and sick of things in general, and of two or three people in particular. Nothing had gone really right for sometime. It seemed to me that I had perpetually been seeing the new moon over my left shoulder. And all the world knows what that means. Everybody was a disappointment. The doll was not only stuffed with sawdust, but the sawdust was all oozing out. The bottom had dropped out of the universe; in fact, I was almost beginning to doubt the existence of a universe. That there was a "wretched, useless, dreary, doting place of sojourn" called a world, I knew only too well. But beyond that—well, just at present my thoughts could not reach beyond that.

And so, Jack Carroll's invitation was just the balm my soul needed. He is so cheerful, fine, normal, that he always puts you right on your feet. And many a time in the last two long years of his globe trotting had I sighed in vain for the "balance" of his presence, for that kindly laugh which never failed to put to rout a pet vagary, for that asked for advice which, if you declined to follow, invariably proved to be to your own lasting regret.

I never should have had that affair with Karl Fletcher—although I admit even yet that he is the only man I have ever known whose music lifted me right out of and beyond myself—had Jack been around to laugh at his longish hair, and soulful eyes, and general pose of the artistic temperament. (I always feel like writing an apology when I use those last two overworked words. They must be so weary!) I never should have permitted Dick Reese's devotion had Jack been on hand to talk to me about Dick Reese's wife. And that last religious excursion of mine—how Jack would have howled at the "Apostle" with the swarthy skin, and the long slim hands with the tapering fingers, and the womanish clothes, and the jargon of that cult which none of us understood and all of us pretended to! And as for Phil, why I don't believe I could have let Phil break my heart if Jack had been around to steady me.

So, you see, that my "Bless you, Jack!" as I hung up the receiver came right from the bottom of my heart. Jack would brace me up! Jack would make me "buck up"! Jack would put new life into me again so that I could work, work, work (I hadn't been able to draw a line in a month)! Jack would laugh the blues out of me! Jack would make me normal!

I positively fussed over my dressing that night—prinked as I had not prinked in a blue moon. I put on my black hat; then, disgruntled at the droop of a feather, I put on my white one; and finally back I went to the black one, droop and all. I laughed aloud there all by myself in front of the mirror. "Good for you, old girl!" I said to the woman in the mirror, who gave me back smile for smile. "Why, even your eyes are laughing!" I actually thrilled, that I really could care once more whether I looked well or ill. I was burying the past, the horrid, hateful past, of the last two years, with its disappointments, its disillusion, its foolishness; just for tonight, perhaps, yet none the less burying it. Jack and the present were the only real things in the world tonight, and if there was a stray bit of fleeting happiness lying around loose, I intended to grab it, and to make it my own for a few hours at least.

AND Jack was so glad to see me! Really, when you have been through all that I have been through of late,—all the wracks, and the "toothache in the heart," and the blue depths of loneliness,—it is great to be with a man toward whom you feel as you would toward a dear, sensible, older brother, who had never failed you, and, you would gamble, even in this most uncertain of worlds, never would.

We chose to walk over to our tiny, beloved unfashionable eating place, and I gave you my word that as we walked along I had all I could do not to slip my hand in Jack's (think how surprised he would have been!) and swing arms with him gaily just as we used to when I was seven and he was twelve, and the other boys used to laugh at him for seeing a kid home from dancing school.

I had always kept this restaurant sacred to Jack,—I am rather freakish about such things,—that is, always but that one time when I asked Phil to take me there, and could have slain myself for it afterward, we had such a miserable time.

And—will you believe me?—our funny, little, fat waiter Felix was still there, and bowed, and smiled, and scraped, and fairly cooed his "*Bon soir, Mademoiselle, Monsieur Carroll,*" and danced around like a plump little cherub, putting my coat, lining side out, over the

back of my chair, and making a pillow of my muff for my back in quite the approved, fashionable, lobster palace manner. It had always been a mystery to Jack and me where Felix had acquired all his parlor tricks; but it was even a greater mystery that he retained them in an atmosphere where parlor tricks were not deemed a necessity. Then he stood and beamed at us for at least one minute, before cocking his round little head on one side bird fashion, preparatory to taking our order. It was all very refreshing. We were back in the dear Land of Used to Be, in the twinkling of a waiter's eye!

HOW do you think I look, Jack?" I asked as Felix trotted off to those mysterious regions where messes with marvelous names are prepared for the hungry and unwary.

"Fine—all but the flop of that feather,"

"I knew you'd hate that," I laughed; "but it's really rather smart." Why, it was perfect to be criticized again! "But I don't mean my clothes. How do I look?" I wondered if he'd notice the pounds the scales told me had passed into nothingness.

"Well, pretty well. A little thinner, perhaps."

"Careful, careful!" I warned. "That's a dangerous thing to say to an American woman these straight up and down days. She's likely to fall on your neck for pure joy, and that might be embarrassing—in a public place."

"Oh, I passed the embarrassed stage years and years ago," Jack came back. "Go as far as you like."

"Frivol!" I scoffed. "Is it becoming to me or not?" I demanded. Personally, I thought I looked like a pickled chicken.

"We-ell—" Jack hesitated. He is the only person who always tells me the truth.

"Go on! I'm bracing myself."

"It gives you a sort of hungry wolf expression."

"That settles it! One dozen raw eggs for me, and two quarts of milk a day, beginning tomorrow,—you needn't order them tonight,—and hang the expense! Lead me to a henry!"

"The same dear Lady Frivolous, aren't you?" Jack laughed.

I knew I wasn't; but I was glad that I was fooling Jack into thinking I was, so I lied boldly, and said, "Just the same, not a thought that isn't frivolous, save my joy at seeing you again. That's making me almost 'bunsy in the head.'"

"Well, you can't guess how great it is to see you again. To be here together, you and I, in the same old place, just as we used to be! If we'd been a minute earlier, we could have had our old table, right under that impossible picture of Vesuvius rampant. And to find Felix here! Do you remember that we used to call him our guardian angel?"

I nodded. Felix was such a wholesome landmark! That wretched night when Phil and I were here, the guardian angel was not.

"Do you know, Jinny, I might as well tell you, I half dreaded to see you?"

"Why?" I marveled, in my astonishment almost making Felix spill the soup he was putting before me.

"Oh, your letters."

"Didn't you like them?" I reproached; though I knew full well what he meant.

"Why, they were really very unsatisfactory."

"Letters always are."

"No, not always; but yours were. I used to think you wrote a very good letter; but—well, for the last six months they have been the most impersonal things I have ever read. Of course it was illuminating to read that you considered 'The Master Builder' finer, in a way, than any of Ibsen's plays. That meant a lot to me, thousands of miles away. Jack's sarcasm was quite biting, for him. 'Also that 'The Blue Bird' appealed to you so strongly that you were not going to see it for fear of being disappointed in it; that, being Puccini mad, you were going to the premiere of 'The Girl of the Golden West,' even if you had to pawn your shoes to be able to do so; that—oh, I can't think of all the things that filled your letters,—stupid, uninteresting things, with never a real word about yourself. It seemed to me that we must have grown horribly apart, if you had to write in that way to me,—to me, your big brother of a father confessor!" Jack's smile was a bit wistful. "And that is the reason why I half dreaded to see you."

"And now that you have seen me?" I looked at Jack

steadily. Oh, how I hoped he'd say, "Fess up, little sister!" there were so many, many things I wanted to get out of my system,—things I could tell Jack, and could tell no one else in all the world; things I knew I should have to tell him sooner or later. I had thought that I wanted to bury the past; to bury it for tonight, anyway. Now all I wanted to do was to dig it up, to tear its grave clothes from it. "And now that you have seen me, Jack?" I said again.

"Why, I think perhaps my dear Lady Frivolous was just posing with her Ibsen, and her Maeterlinck, and her Puccini. Only what a foolishness to do it with me! And I hate to think of all I have missed these long, long months,—the nice, chatty, intimate sheets of paper you used to send me. Is that the truth, Jinny dear, were you just posing?" Jack's smile was the very spirit of kindness.

It almost finished me. And had Felix—bless him!—not come to my rescue just then, by putting a most delectable looking concoction in front of Jack, I should have disgraced myself utterly. That I should probably do it later on I had no doubt; for I felt very choky—in that mood where one kind word is sufficient to tear one into a thousand bits.

Jack served me to the Lucullan offering of Felix, and then, with unusual persistence, went back to the old subject. "Is that the truth, Jinny dear, were you just posing?"

I looked at him for a moment. I started to answer; but my under lip trembled so that I knew if I spoke I should cry. And this time there was no Felix to save me from myself. A tear rolled down my cheek.

WHY, what's the matter, Jinny girl?" Jack looked at me wonderingly.

"Oh, Jack, it's—it's all been so awful! I've—I've missed you so!"

"Jinny!" Jack reached across the table and took one of my hands in both of his.

"I've missed you so!" I almost wailed.

"Jinny dear!" Jack tightened his grasp.

"I've wanted your advice so many, many times!"

"Oh!"

"I've—I've needed you to brace me up, to make me do the right thing, so many, many times!"

"Oh!" Jack drew his hands away slowly, and I wiped away my two or three foolish tears. "Tell me all about everything, little girl." Jack's voice was so kind that I almost went to pieces all over again.

"I will—I want to—I've got to! In the first place, Jack, I'm a fool."

"So I've heard you say, Jinny," Jack smiled.

"Well, I am, and I made a fool of myself over Karl Fletcher."

"He of the hyacinthine looks?"

I nodded.

"And the eyes that Alice Bradford said pierced to the depths of her soul and beyond?"

I nodded.

"Alice was going some! Oh, what easy marks you women are! Hair and eyes—and you're doomed."

Jack shook his head pityingly.

"And after Karl?"

"Then I thought I'd found the religion of my life."

"And his name was?"

"Oh, Jack!" I protested.

"Always look for the man."

Jack came back calmly.

"Well, never mind about that. That lasted only until I'd seen the 'Apostle' eat a meal."

Jack threw back his head and howled. "Some day your sense of humor will save you, Jinny girl. Well, then what? Then who? I mean," Jack corrected himself.

"Dick Reese."

"Oh, Jinny!"

"Yes, and I'm just as much ashamed of it as you are."

"My little friend Jinny a poucher!"

"Oh, Jack, if you'd only been here to remind me of his wife!"

"And I'd always thought you such a square, white little

sport. Oh, Jinny, Jinny!"

Jack's disappointment in me cut me to the quick.

"Weren't there men enough around who didn't have wives?"

"I don't know," I said gloomily. Really, I've never yet been able to explain to myself just why I did like Dick Reese.

"Did you grow very fond of him, Jinny?"

"Yes, pretty fond, Jack."

"And people talked?"

"And people talked. Oh, Jack, I missed you so then!"

"It is convenient to have an old, faithful fool around when the world goes against one." Jack's face was quite stern; there was no kindly smile in his blue eyes now.

"Jack, don't say that!" I pleaded.

"It saves trouble sometimes to call things by their

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wished frantically for Celie; but she would not come back. I had been quite positive with her. I sat down and hastily wrote another answer to beg him to be discreet, not knowing just how I could reach him without ringing.

I heard footsteps along the corridor. Celie was returning, the mink! I had been so positive with her, too! She came in with her hands behind her, looking guilty. I stood with my hands behind me trying to look cross.

"Another, Celie?"

"Ah, Monsieur is most persuasive," she replied. "Mademoiselle, do not be angry. It is the last *billet-doux*, I promise." She thrust the *billet-doux* forward.

"I hope so," I thrust my *billet-doux* forward. "There, take that to Monsieur. It is a silly notion—such correspondence. It means nothing. I shall regard another as impertinent."

"Oh, oui, oh, oui, oui!" squealed Celie, smiling. "Monsieur is most original."

I was never so exasperated in my life. I did not read it. I had told him I would not read the next one. I put it away over my heart with the others where it nestled—did it? It did not! It was still more stiff and uncomfortable. I wondered what was in it. After all, it came before mine reached him—it was not the next one. I drew it forth, turned it over and over, wondering again—and opened it!

Its contents were rather amusing:

DEAR LOULIE.—Meet me at the foot of the stairs to the tennis court in five minutes. I have something most important to communicate.

To be continued next Sunday

HOMEMADE CANNON

THE mention of wooden guns suggests a company of boy soldiers commanded by a Captain who wears a tin sword. The revolutionary soldiers of Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, however, have from

time to time made cannon from trees and applied them to practical purposes. In the Antilles there grows a peculiar tree with a winding grain, so tenacious of fiber that to split it by ordinary means is almost an impossibility.

When wanted for artillery purposes the tree is felled, a section some five feet in length and one foot in diameter is selected and cut, the bark is removed, and uneven places on the surface are dressed down.

The embryo cannon is then placed on rude trusses and a bore burned in it, a process that serves further still to harden the wood. While the bore is being burned, green ox hides are cut into long strips by beginning in the center and working toward the outer edge, as one would peel an apple.

When all is in readiness, one end of this rawhide band, which is about three inches in width, is spiked to the wooden cannon near the breech. A lever, or bar, is attached to the butt. Two or three negroes grasp the arms of the bar and slowly turn the hollowed log on its supports. The band of green hide is kept under a strain, and in this way the core of the cannon is wound with one of the toughest materials, wire excepted, in the world.

The first layer of hide is tightly wound to the muzzle of the growing gun and back toward the breech again, until a number of layers have thus been wound on and the promising piece of artillery has grown several inches in diameter.

It is then placed in a draft of dry, hot air and allowed to harden. When the hardening and curing process is complete, the persevering inhabitants have a really serviceable weapon.

One of these homemade wood and rawhide cannon, used during the last Cuban insurrection, is said to have withstood one hundred and four charges of powder before becoming useless. The projectiles for it were made of scrap iron, broken stone, and fire hardened clay balls.

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right names," he said shortly. "When one of your dearest foes came to you and told you that people were talking, you called a halt, I suppose?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Thank God for that gleam of sense! And the wound healed?"

"Quickly. 'Twas only a bad scratch, anyway." I half smiled; but there was no answering response in Jack's face.

"And is that all?"

I shook my head. Only Heaven knows how I wish I could have said yes! "There is one thing more, Jack, one thing—" I hesitated.

"Don't tell me unless you want to, Jinny," Jack looked at me, and once more the kindly smile came into his eyes. "Poor little girl!" he added, half under his breath.

"Oh, Jack, I have been so miserable, so miserable!" The tears rushed to my eyes.

"Jack, do you know Phil Arnold?"

"Yes," said Jack slowly, "I know him."

"Then here's the whole story in a nutshell. I had no wish to dwell on it. 'We met—we fell in love with each other. I believed he was the one person in the world. He made me believe it. We had every taste in common. We were utterly happy in just being together. Nothing else made any difference. And while all this was going on, while he was at the height of the most ardent lovelorn, a note came from him one day telling me that it was all a mistake. And one month later he married Julie Griswold."

"The curl!"

"And my heart was broken, absolutely and entirely!"

"Poor little girl!" Jack's eyes filled with tears. "I am so sorry for you! And you really loved him, Jinny?"

"Oh, so much, Jack, so much!"

"And the ache is there still?"

"Yes, there still."

Jack sighed deeply. "And you had never known that all that sort of thing was Phil Arnold's métier, poor, little, woebegone Jinny?"

I shook my head wonderingly.

"That he'd been breaking hearts and boasting of it since his college days? The curl!"

"No, I never knew. Oh, if I only had! Oh, if I only had been around to tell me, Jack! It never would have happened if you'd only been around to steady me."

"I have never realized until now just what a useful member of society I am." He paused for a moment. Then he said slowly, "Jinny, is this all you have to tell me?"

"Yes, Jack, all, all!" Oh, the feeling of relief that swept over me! "Except that I am

more glad to have you back, to be here with you, than you can possibly guess, and that if you ever go away again you'll find me in the morgue when you get back."

JACK smiled slightly at my extravagance. Then he said slowly, "Listen, Jinny; I have something to tell you. I have had my little experience since I have been away."

"Jack!" That such a thing could happen I had never dreamed. It gave me a queer numb feeling inside—Jack!

"Yes, I suppose, if we are really human, it comes to us all, sooner or later. I fell in love while I was away with the dearest, sweetest little girl in all the world."

"Yes!" I said; but my lips refused to smile, try as hard as ever I could to make them, and a vile, chilly feeling swept over me. Phil was gone, and Jack was going! "Tell Felix to bring some coffee, Jack," I said shortly.

"Surely. Pardon me. But aren't you going to have a bit of something sweet first, Jinny?"

I shook my head. I was getting all the "sweet" I could stand. "Just the coffee," Felix trotted off importantly.

"The dearest little girl imaginable," Jack repeated dreamily. "There is no one like her in all the world. There never has been. There never will be. She is the only one. But—" he waved his hand and shrugged his shoulders.

"But what, Jack?" I am so utterly selfish that that expressive shrug of his sent my spirits soaring. Something was wrong with the idyl, and I was mean-spirited enough to rejoice.

"Well, like your Phil," he growled the word out savagely, "she loved someone else!"

"And that was the end of it all?"

"That was the end of it all. There was nothing left for me to do but to withdraw decently and like a gentleman, was there?"

"No, not if she loved someone else."

"I thought you'd agree with me."

"And," it hurt; but I had to be fair, "if the someone else loved her?"

"He didn't!" I all but shouted. "Then I'd—" I bit my lip. I couldn't plead the case for this unknown girl.

"I judge he didn't, from what you have just told me," said Jack lightly.

I felt every drop of blood leave my face. I grew cold to my fingertips. "Jack, do you know what you are saying?"

"I know," he said even more quietly. "What do you mean?" I half whispered. "You know what I mean, Jinny. Oh,

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can't you see, can't you feel, that there is only one woman in the world,—one, alone, out of all the world? Why I did not know it years ago, I cannot understand. Perhaps then everything might have been different. Oh, the blindness, the blindness! It all came over me with an overwhelming, engulfing, force while I was away. Is it too late, Jinny? You say the ache is still there. Will you—will you let me try to make it less? Will you?"

I could not speak. The tears were streaming down my cheeks, and I didn't care if they were.

"Will you, Jinny dear?" Jack pleaded. "Two lumps, Mami's!" Felix, armed to the teeth with percolators and things, broke in at that moment.

I nodded my head.

"You will?" The gladness of a lifetime was in Jack's voice.

"Oh, I meant that for Felix," I managed to say.

"But can't I have just a little piece of that too?" Jack pleaded. "I'll be very patient. I'll wait years if necessary. Jinny dearest, will you let me try to make the ache less?"

And what could I say? I ask you frankly, knowing all the facts, what could I say? And then, I tell you quite frankly, I said it. And I have never ceased wondering just what little Jinny would have said, if Felix had not appeared with the coffee and his question at that particular moment.

But then, as you know, Jack and I always have called Felix our Guardian Angel. And to live up to one's reputation—well, that's something, even for an angel!

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